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AUTHOR Matuszek, Paula; Lee, Ann
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ABSTRACT

The various needs for evaluating evaluators and their efforts are discussed in this paper. The argument is presented that evaluators should not themselves carry out summative evaluation on their own efforts. Several possible purposes of evaluation of evaluation staffs and products are pursued, and the methods and persons most appropriate to each purpose are described. Planning an evaluation of evaluation to best meet the needs of evaluators is also discussed. (Author/MV)

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EVALUATING EVALUATION

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TM006 226

AUTHORS: PAULA MATUSZEK, PH.D.
ANN LEE, PH.D.

OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND EVALUATION
AUSTIN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT
AUSTIN, TEXAS
78752

EVALUATING EVALUATION

INTRODUCTION

Evaluators are people who question. They question whether some programs in the schools are worthwhile. They question whether other programs might be carried out more effectively. They question because they are the kind of people who want to know what is going on and believe that such questions are best answered by examining data relevant to the issue.

One of the issues which evaluators inevitably question is evaluation itself. They question whether they are doing the best job they can with the resources at hand. They question the accuracy and technical acceptability of their work. More basically, they question the worth of evaluation efforts. They seek answers to questions about evaluation as much and as eagerly as to questions about programs. Thus is born meta-evaluation.

Evaluation is still a relatively new field. Only recently has it had the time to pause in its attempts to get its evaluations accomplished to deal in depth with the question of its own evaluation. There are many signs to show that this concern is now growing--AERA workshops in meta-evaluation, 65 advance requests for this paper, increasing discussions among evaluators gathering together any time and any place. This search for improvement is a healthy process, which should contribute in the long run to a general improvement in the whole field of evaluation. However, it is not necessarily appropriate for evaluators themselves to carry out a meta-evaluation. Just as evaluators distrust program personnel who feel they can complete an unbiased evaluation of their own worth, the credibility of an evaluator trying to answer questions on which his job will depend is

necessarily in question. No one should be asked to decide on his own existence.

Not all evaluations are carried out, however, to decide whether a program should be continued. It is less clear whether an evaluator can do an effective job of formative evaluation of his own activities. Perhaps for some aspects of evaluation a meta-evaluation carried out by evaluators themselves would be most informative. In any case, the question of who should evaluate evaluators is not one which is going to go away if ignored. Besides the evaluators themselves, the clients of evaluation--school board, program officers, administrators, the public--will inevitably ask summative questions about evaluation. The task must be done--and formally or informally it will be done. The only real question is who will do it.

The answer to this question must inevitably depend on another: What is the purpose of the meta-evaluation? It may be to decide whether evaluation is a wise expenditure of resources, and should therefore be continued. It may be to provide information to evaluators to improve their own functioning. It may be to validate the quality of the evaluator's work. It may be an attempt to ensure survival, or placate angry school personnel, or even to meet some mandated guideline. In short, the reasons for meta-evaluation cover as wide a scope as the reasons for program evaluation. Each of these reasons carries different information needs and implies different persons or groups to do the meta-evaluation.

Although, as noted earlier, the topic of meta-evaluation is beginning to gain in interest and attention, it can hardly be considered a well-developed topic. Stufflebeam[1] noted in 1974 that meta-evaluation was limited in

[1]Stufflebeam, D. Toward a Technology for Evaluating Evaluation. ERIC Accession Number ED 090 319

scope, with minimal research and little examination of the problems involved in actual evaluation work. Since that time awareness of the importance of the topic has been increasing, but this increase has not been accompanied by a corresponding increase in research and examination in the literature.

WE ASKED RESEARCH DIRECTORS...

In order to explore some of these questions, we conducted a survey of 58 large city research directors in the United States. These directors are members of a group who meet annually at AERA. Two questionnaires were sent to each person on the list of this group. One questionnaire asked for research directors' attitudes toward meta-evaluation and also elicited their perceived needs for meta-evaluation of their own office's activities. The second questionnaire, to be filled out only by those who had some kind of evaluation conducted of their office, asked for information concerning this evaluation--who carried it out, whether it was worth it, etc. The general questionnaire was returned by 39 of the 58 people to whom it was mailed. Responses to this questionnaire are shown in Figure 1.

"WE SHOULD PRACTICE WHAT WE PREACH."

In general the results of this questionnaire support the conclusion that meta-evaluation is a concern; 36 of the respondents said they were in favor of evaluation of public school activities. The responses included comments such as "We should practice what we preach", and "Evaluation is essential to monitoring effective services." One of the two dissenters indicated that evaluation criteria would be very difficult to establish; some persons in favor of meta-evaluation expressed the same concern. In spite of this overwhelming support for the idea, however, only 10 (26%) of the respondents reported having had some kind of formal evaluation of

1. Have your department's activities ever been formally evaluated?

10	yes
28	no
1	no response

2. On how many occasions have your evaluation activities been formally evaluated?

28	zero	2	three times
3	once	3	four or more times
2	twice	1	no response

3. Are you in favor of "evaluation of public school evaluation activities"?

35	yes
2	no
2	no response

4. Why would you want to have your department's activities evaluated?

16	general self improvement
10	self improvement in specific areas
5	establish or clarify our role
4	establish credibility for us
4	for "good public relations" and/or to gain staff
4	set priorities and allocate resources
2	improve professional standards
2	general positive comments
2	other
1	no response

5. Please rank the following evaluation activities in order of their greatest need for evaluation in your department (1=greatest need).

Median Ranking	Activity	No. of people ranking item 1	2	3
1	Communication of results	9	9	2
2.5	Evaluation designs	8	8	3
2.5	External communication with school personnel	8	7	4
5	Data quality	5	5	6
5	Management skills of evaluators	4	2	8
5	Instrument design	2	1	4
7.5	Data analyses	2	1	8
7.5	Internal management	4	3	2

Figure 1: QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES. Responses to questionnaire sent to directors of large city research directors in spring, 1977. Based on 39 respondents, of 58 mailed. (Page 1 of 3)

6. What kind of information would you want to see collected in such an evaluation?

The responses to this question were so varied that it seemed likely that the question communicated different things to different people; we could not make a meaningful tally of responses.

7. Do you believe that your department could do an adequate job of evaluating its own activities?

17	yes
21	no
1	no response

8. If money were no object, whom would you ask to do an external evaluation of your department's activities? (You may name a specific person or describe the qualifications, affiliation, etc., of the "ideal evaluator".

The data were first categorized by types of persons desired:

18	public school evaluator
12	university professor
7	specifically named individuals or groups
3	public school administrators
2	management experts
1	external firms
6	other
1	don't know

The data were then categorized by whether a team was specifically indicated.

21	team specified
11	individual
2	not clear from response whether team or individual was preferred.

9. How would you locate this person?

12	send out a RFP
6	select someone from my own personal knowledge or contacts
6	Through AERA or the Large City Research Directors
3	Ask a colleague's advice
3	Involve others within the district in the search
3	Other

Figure 1 Continued. (Page 2 of 3)

10. If your department contracted an external evaluation of its activities do you predict that it would be worth the money it cost?

18	yes
4	no
15	don't know
2	no response

11. What political payoffs would be created by an evaluation of your department's activities?

9	I'm not sure
9	it would have positive effects (prestige, public relations, respect, support)
4	no effect
4	improve our credibility
3	improve our activities/skills
2	client would understand our activities better
1	improve our funding situation
7	other

12. Do you have any otherconvictions or attitudes about "evaluating public school evaluation"?

The responses we received to this question indicate that yes, people do have other convictions and attitudes--voluminously. The essays we received defied coding and tallying; we have referenced some in the text and integrated them into our thinking, but we can't reduce them to numbers.

Figure 1 Continued. (Page 3 of 3)

their activities.

The reasons for evaluation given by the respondents are focused heavily on formative information--26 respondents listed some general or specific self-improvement reasons for wanting an evaluation. Other reasons focused on persons external to the evaluator--such as credibility--formed a much smaller category. Of the kinds of activities seen as needing improvement, communication of results clearly stands out in the minds of evaluators. Evaluation designs and communication with school personnel were also ranked high in concern. Data analysis and management skills of evaluators were not ranked at the top of their concerns by many respondents, but they were ranked third by many people--these are evidently relatively small, but prevalent, concerns.

Responses to the question about what kind of information should be collected in such an evaluation support the concern of those who feel that criteria would be difficult to establish. Most answers were very general --usefulness of results, quality of data, cost effectiveness. Most respondents in fact indicated the area they would like to see addressed, rather than the specific information which would elucidate this area. Indeed, the answers sound very much like those which program people give initially when their input into evaluation designs is sought!

"WE TELL IT LIKE IT IS"

Surprisingly (to us, at least), nearly half the evaluators felt that they could do a good job of evaluating themselves. These persons felt that they had competent staff with a good understanding of the framework in which they work. The primary concern of those who did not feel that they could adequately evaluate themselves was bias or lack of objectivity.

Besides the evaluator, who is perceived as a desirable evaluator? The majority of responses to a question about whom the evaluator would choose to carry out a meta-evaluation fell into two groups--public school evaluators and persons associated with a university. They would be located by RFP's, by personal contacts, through AERA. Some people had individuals already in mind; the majority did not. Of the 39 respondents, 21 specifically indicated that they wanted a team or group of individuals.

"AND I'M STILL NOT SURE"

Although there is a strong interest in evaluation and strong belief that it should be done, there was definitely concern about whether it would be worth while. Nineteen of the respondents felt it would be worthwhile to contract a meta-evaluation, and only a few said it definitely would not be worth the cost, but 15 respondents expressed doubt about the value. Reasons for this doubt included lack of good criteria, bad experiences from past contracted evaluations by external firms, and cost of the evaluation. The general state of uncertainty concerning the whole area was graphically illustrated by one respondent, who said "We did [contract an evaluation] and I'm still not sure."

IN GENERAL

Evaluators' general convictions regarding meta-evaluation confirmed our own feelings in this area--there is strong interest in, and strong perceived need for, meta-evaluation. There is also strong concern about the criteria to be used and the background of the meta-evaluators, as well as about the cost.

Concerns such as these are certainly familiar to any evaluator--they are identical to those expressed by most of the people we evaluate! It was a bit startling to discover that we have the same doubts about and fears of our evaluators as our "evaluatees" have of us!

WHO EVALUATES? WHY ARE YOU EVALUATING?

In addition to the general results given above, we wanted to address the question of whether the perceptions of who makes the best evaluator differ depending on the reasons for the evaluation and the greatest needs for evaluation. To study this issue we carried out a series of two-way cross-tabulations between "who" (as indicated by questions 7 and 8) and "what" (as indicated by questions 4 and 5). It was immediately clear that, as expected, different needs tended to be associated with different meta-evaluator preferences. Results are summarized in Figure 2 below.

	Public School Person	University Person	Administrator	External Firm
Self improvement	12	7	1	5
Credibility	0	2	0	2
Professional concerns	1	1	1	1
Public relations	4	2	2	0
Priority and resource allocation	2	2	0	1
Role establishment or clarification	2	2	1	1
Other	2	2	0	2

Figure 2: PERSONS CHOSEN FOR VARIOUS EVALUATION PURPOSES. Cross-tabulation of reason given for an evaluation (question 4) with person named to carry out an evaluation (question 8).

There was considerable variety in when the various meta-evaluators named were chosen. For reasons which are essentially internal to an evaluation unit--self improvement, for instance--the most frequent choice for evaluator was another public school evaluator. Evaluators evidently have most trust in one of their own kind understanding the context and being able to provide useful feedback. When the purpose was externally motivated, on the other hand--credibility, for instance--a university professor or external firm became more desirable. This probably reflects a belief that another public school evaluator might be perceived by the "outside" as too close to the evaluator to be unbiased. It may also reflect a feeling that external concerns need other viewpoints reflected in the meta-evaluation.

Examining the ranking of specific activities by need for evaluation and comparing this ranking to the evaluator recommended refines this general observation somewhat. These results are summarized in Figure 3. Public school evaluators were in general recommended more often than any other category of meta-evaluator for evaluating internal matters, but persons who ranked their need for internal management evaluation high named university professors to carry out the evaluation 50% of the time and public school evaluators only 28% of the time. Conversely, while public school evaluators were not in general the most frequent choice when the reason for meta-evaluation expressed was externally oriented, for the specific activity of external communication with school personnel, those rating it high in need for evaluation named public school evaluators 41% of the time, and university professors only 19% of the time. It seems as though there are some categories, such as management, which are not perceived as primarily in the realm of the public school evaluator. There are others, such as external

communication with the schools, where in spite of the existence of experts in communication the general knowledge of school contexts which another public school evaluator would have tends to outweigh other considerations.

	Team	Individual	Public School Evaluator	University Professor	Management Firm	External Firm	Administrator	Specific Individuals	Other	Don't Know	No Response
Evaluation Designs	10	2	6	6	0	1	2	4	1	1	3
Data Analyses	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	0	0	1
Instrument Design	2	0	2	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0
Management Skills	2	2	3	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1
Communication of Results	12	4	8	6	0	0	1	3	5	0	0
Internal Management	4	3	5	9	0	0	1	1	2	0	0
External Communications	8	7	9	4	1	0	2	3	3	0	0
Data Quality	6	2	4	4	0	1	0	3	0	0	2

Figure 3: PERSONS CHOSEN FOR EVALUATION FOR DIFFERENT AREAS RANKING HIGH IN NEED OF EVALUATION. Cross-tabulation of person named to carry out an evaluation (question 8) with activities ranked first or second in importance (question 5).

Figure 3 also illustrates another facet of the choice of evaluator--teams versus individuals. For most categories of activities, teams and individuals were named with approximately equal frequency. However, respondents ranking data quality and communication of results high in need for evaluation specified a team 75% of the time, and persons ranking evaluation designs high in need specified a team 83% of the time. This may indicate a perception of these areas as particularly complex and multi-faceted, thus requiring a team approach.

Another interesting insight into choice of meta-evaluators is given by looking at the relationship between activities ranked high in need for evaluation and response to the question about carrying out an adequate self-evaluation. These results are summarized in Figure 4 below.

	NO	YES	% NO
Internal Management	6	1	.86
External Communications	10	5	.67
Data Quality	4	5	.44
Evaluation Designs	9	7	.56
Data Analyses	2	1	.67
Instrument Design	3	0	1.00
Management Skills	3	3	.50
Communication of Results	8	9	.47

Figure 4: SELF-EVALUATION RELATED TO ACTIVITIES IN NEED OF EVALUATION. Cross-tabulation of response to whether evaluator's department could adequately evaluate its own activities (question 7) by activities ranked first or second in need of evaluation (question 5).

Evaluators ranking internal management high in need for evaluation seldom felt that they could do an adequate job of self evaluation, whereas those concerned about communication of results and data quality were more likely to feel that they could do an adequate job. This pattern reflects that shown in Figure 3--public school evaluators feel they could do an adequate job of self evaluation in roughly the same areas as they feel most strongly that a public school evaluator would make a suitable meta-evaluator. Categories where they feel least likely to be able to evaluate themselves are also those where they tended to list university professors and external firms with greater frequency.

"A TEAM CONSISTING OF"

Another interesting insight into choice of evaluators is illustrated in Figure 5--the relationship between kinds of evaluators named and whether a team was specifically indicated. Most of the categories of meta-evaluator were most likely to be mentioned as part of a team. However, one third of those mentioning another public school evaluator did not specify a team; only 18% of those specifying a university professor did not do so as part of a team. A team was not generally specified when the choice was a firm; this may be because the firm is perceived as a team already. These data suggest that evaluators see their field as many-faceted, requiring experts from several different backgrounds to evaluate their efforts. However, another public school evaluator is evidently more likely to be considered capable of carrying out an entire evaluation alone--presumably because he must also have some background in all the facets of evaluation.

	Team	Individual	% Team
Public School Evaluator	12	6	.67
University Professor	9	2	.89
Management or Consultant Firm	0	2	.00
External Firm	0	1	.00
Administrator of District	3	0	1.00
Specific Individual	6	1	.86
Other	4	1	.80
Don't Know	0	0	.00

Figure 5: CHOICE OF EVALUATOR RELATED TO CHOICE OF TEAM OR INDIVIDUAL. Cross-tabulation of what kind of person was named and whether a team was specifically requested on item 8.

"ALWAYS WORTHWHILE TO BE SHAPED UP"

Clearly who should carry out a meta-evaluation depends on the purpose for the evaluation and the greatest needs for evaluation. Does the expected worth of the evaluation also depend on what is being evaluated? Figure 6 sheds some light on this question.

	YES	NO	NOT SURE	% YES
Internal Management	1	1	4	.17
External Communications	6	1	7	.43
Data Quality	4	1	4	.44
Evaluation Designs	7	2	5	.50
Data Analyses	1	0	1	.50
Instrument Design	0	0	1	.00
Management Skills	4	0	1	.80
Communication of Results	8	2	7	.47

Figure 6: NEED FOR EVALUATION RELATED TO WHETHER EVALUATION WOULD BE WORTHWHILE. Cross-tabulation of areas ranked first or second on need for evaluation (question 5) with whether an evaluation would be worth the money (question 10).

Clearly there are perceived differences in the worth of evaluation, depending on the category to be evaluated. Persons concerned about management skills of evaluators, data analyses and evaluation designs were most likely to feel that an evaluation would be worth it. Persons who rated internal management high in need for evaluation were much less likely to feel that it would be worth it.

This survey confirms two beliefs with which we started an examination of the question of who evaluates the evaluator:

- The importance of meta-evaluation is increasing.
- The person who is perceived as best to carry out a meta-evaluation depends on the purpose of the evaluation.

"...INFORMATION FOR DECISION MAKING"

Meta-evaluation shares many characteristics with any other evaluation. One way of examining the data just reported and bringing some resolution to the persistent question of "who" is to examine the evaluation of evaluation in a framework which has proved fruitful for many program evaluations--that of providing information for decision making. There are many decisions which a meta-evaluation might address:

- Should the evaluation office be expanded, cut back, refunded, etc?
- Should the evaluation office's findings be used for making decisions about program continuation, refunding, etc?
- Should the evaluation office's findings be used for making decisions about program focus, organization, etc?
- What should the evaluation office evaluate?
- Should the evaluation office be reorganized?
- Should the evaluation office change the kinds of questions it asks?
- Should the evaluation office make changes in the technical aspects of its work?
- Should the evaluation office change the way it presents its results?
- Should the evaluation office make changes in the way it interacts with the rest of the district?

Let us consider some of these decisions.

"EVALUATION GOES ON ANNUALLY AS WE SUBMIT OUR BUDGETS FOR THE COMING YEAR TO OUR ADMINISTRATIVE SUPERIORS."

Ultimately the decision about continuing, cutting back, etc. will be made, clearly, by whoever approves the evaluation's budget--district school board, federal program officer, etc. Kinds of criteria likely to be used include: What proportion of the total budget goes into evaluation? Did

the unit provide information useful in making important decisions about programs? If evaluation findings were acted on by programs, did the programs improve? This decision will clearly be a politically oriented one, with relatively little hard data to answer it. This suggests that the meta-evaluator should be first of all one familiar with the politics of a school district. The level of technical skills required is relatively low, but the level of credibility required is very high, since the data are likely to be "soft". From the evaluation office's viewpoint, a meta-evaluation addressing this point will probably not have much internal benefit; however, the external PR value of having had an evaluation carried out can be enormous.

"TO PROVIDE AN INDEPENDENT JUDGMENT THAT THE OFFICE IS FUNCTIONING ON A PROFESSIONALLY SOUND BASIS."

The next three decisions listed above are all related--basically they deal with the worth and credibility of the findings of the evaluation office. Some of the questions which would be addressed here are technical ones: Are the analyses appropriate? Are the conclusions drawn warranted by the data? Are proper testing and scoring procedures used to minimize error? In addition, there are some less technical questions which will certainly influence the decision: Are the criteria used for the evaluation appropriate in the opinion of the decision maker? How much influence on the findings presented did the staff of the program being evaluated have?

The decision maker probably has formed an opinion on most of these questions. Thus, an evaluation office may want to initiate an evaluation in this area, simply to ensure that some accurate data is available to the decision maker. The evaluator here will clearly need a good technical

background--possibly a university professor. This is probably an area where a public school evaluator is not a good choice for evaluation--his credibility as meta-evaluator might not be sufficiently high. On the other hand, most public schools are familiar with the university researcher who insists that all studies have to be carried out following a strict experimental-control model; a review by someone with orientation would probably rule out as invalid 90% of the work performed by all evaluation offices. Therefore the person responsible for this meta-evaluation should ideally also have an understanding of the context in which public school evaluation takes place. This is one area in which a team approach could be of value.

The evaluator cannot himself effectively carry out an evaluation addressing either the question of continuation of his office or the questions relating to the use of his data to make program changes. Some of the data can indeed be gathered internally by evaluation offices, but the need for objectivity (or rather, for perceived objectivity) is too high to allow an effective self evaluation to take place. However, by initiating the process of such a meta-evaluation, the evaluator often has some choice over the evaluator chosen; using this choice wisely can avoid the problem of an evaluation being carried out without an understanding of context, while making sure that the expertise to do a good job is present.

"TO ESTABLISH PRIORITIES"

What topics/programs should the evaluation office evaluate? This is a decision for which an office can gather information. Questions to be addressed might include: What programs receive a large proportion of the budget? What areas are perceived as important by district administrators?

In what areas are major decisions going to be made during the coming year? In what areas will information in fact be used? Ideally the evaluation office will not itself set its evaluation areas, but will work with administrative or policy-setting personnel above the office to establish these areas. The evaluation office can very well provide much of the information which goes into this decision. This would not be the case only if the evaluation office were perceived as having a bias--being "out to get" a program, for instance.

"TO IMPROVE EVALUATION DESIGNS, TECHNIQUES, AND STRATEGIES"

The remaining questions deal with decisions which will probably be made by the evaluation office itself. Thus the choice of meta-evaluator is probably largely the evaluator's. The objectivity of the meta-evaluator needs to be answered only to the satisfaction of the evaluator. The best choice for the evaluation depends on the strongest needs for improvement in the office, as noted in the survey responses. For internal management, management skills of evaluators, and communication, outside experts may well be aware of techniques and ideas not normally in an evaluator's background. For technical areas such as data quality and analyses, strong technical skills are needed. If he is to benefit the evaluation office, the meta-evaluator must be capable of addressing complex statistical issues which have no obvious or simple answers. This evaluator has less need for an understanding of the context of evaluation in the schools, since the findings will be filtered through the understanding that the office has before they are implemented. In a department with many resources and a variety of backgrounds staff members may be able to serve this function

for each other; more typically in this situation a university person has the most appropriate combination of skills. This is also likely to be a time-consuming area of decisions to address, since it involves familiarity with an office's activities and feedback about the office which cannot be given in an hour. Thus, working with local university personnel over a period of time may be a desirable option.

"TRICKY BUSINESS"

There is obviously no single answer to the question of who can best evaluate the evaluator. External persons provide relatively higher objectivity and relatively less understanding of the local context compared to self evaluation. Other public school evaluators may have a good awareness of the context and of specific problems, but they will also have some problems with credibility. In general, there tends to be a trade off between knowledge of context and credibility.

The most important thing for evaluators to realize at present is not that some particular category of evaluator is best, but that there are both costs and benefits from any category of evaluation. Meta-evaluation is coming--by addressing the issue now evaluators maximize their likelihood of having the benefits to them of an evaluation outweigh the costs.

" MANY POSSIBILITIES FOR RESEARCH ALONG THESE LINES. KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK."

We intend to! We are particularly interested in reaching other persons to gather their opinions and feelings regarding meta-evaluation. If you are interested in being included in a survey, just get your name and address

to one of us (there is a form attached you can use if you wish). We are especially interested in contacting persons who have had their evaluation activities formally evaluated and who have themselves carried out meta-evaluations.

YES, I WOULD LIKE TO BE INCLUDED IN A SURVEY.

NAME_____

POSITION_____

ADDRESS_____

_____

_____

I have been involved in meta-evaluations of my work._____

I have carried out meta-evaluations of other people's_____
evaluations

Mail to:

Paula Matuszek or Ann Lee
6100 Guadalupe, Box 79
Austin, Tx 78752